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ABSTRACT

A study examined the characteristics of successful schools along the Texas-Mexico border, where high percentages of students were Mexican American, came from low socioeconomic backgrounds, and had limited English proficiency. Three elementary schools, three middle schools, and three high schools were selected on the basis of the following criteria: enrollment of at least 66.6 percent Mexican American students, above-average standardized test scores on the Texas state assessment system, and state or national recognition. In many ways, these high-performing schools were similar to other effective schools identified in the literature and were typically characterized as communities of learners. However, study schools differed from other successful schools in at least four areas, which are the focus of this digest. These areas are: (1) collaborative relationships with parents and communities that built on Mexican American cultural values and communication styles and recognized the needs of diverse populations; (2) collaborative governance that empowered teachers and emphasized accountability; (3) student-centered classroom environments in which teacher did "what it takes" to help students succeed; and (4) advocacy-oriented assessment practices to avoid misplacement of limited-English-speaking students in special education. (Contains 13 references.) (SV)

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High-Performing Schools Serving Mexican American Students: What They Can Teach Us

Alicia Paredes Scribner and Jay D. Scribner

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DIGEST

In a recent study along the Texas-Mexico border (Reyes, Scribner, & Paredes Scribner, 1999) we reported the characteristics of successful schools where the student population was mostly Mexican American, from low socioeconomic backgrounds, and where a high percentage of the students were limited English proficient. Based on our study, we concluded that conditions of failure for Mexican American students need not exist. This Digest reviews the findings of our study and others, to discover what such research can teach us about creating schools that better support the success of Mexican American students.

Studying High-Performing Schools Serving Mexican American Students

The method employed to select the schools we studied was a purposive sample. Three elementary schools, three middle schools, and three high schools were selected on the basis of the following criteria: (1) school enrollment of 66.6% or more Mexican American students; (2) schools with above-average standardized test scores on the Texas state assessment system; and (3) schools that had received state and national recognition. After a review of the literature to identify "best practices," a pilot study was conducted in two similar schools. Following the field work phase, data analysis and interpretation were carried out by research teams trained in multicultural research, qualitative analysis, and interpretation techniques.

We discovered that high-performing schools serving Mexican Americans were very similar to other successful schools. Like effective schools in urban communities (Edmonds, 1979), these schools were typically characterized as communities of learners where students came first, teachers set high expectations for all their students, and instruction was interactive and student-centered rather than teacher-centered. Research elsewhere has shown that in high-performing schools, teachers empowered students to become excited about and responsible for their own learning (Blase & Blase, 1994). Additionally, we found that effective schools for Mexican American students shared a vision for all students. Above all, as Valencia (1997) also reported, such schools ignored the barriers to learning often associated with "deficit thinking."

The high-performing schools serving Mexican Americans we studied were not only true communities of learners, they differed from other successful schools in at least four areas:

1. the way they addressed community and family involvement,
2. how they built a collaborative school governance system,
3. their commitment to connecting curricula and instructional techniques to students' funds of knowledge and cultural backgrounds, and
4. how they used advocacy-oriented assessment practices that held educators accountable for their instructional strategies and for the impact they had on Mexican American learners.

The balance of this Digest briefly discusses these four areas of distinction. This discussion may help point the way to creating high-performing schools for Mexican Americans in other parts of the country, encouraging communities to seek innovative solutions to what, in the past, may have seemed like intractable problems.

Collaborative Relationships with Parents and Communities

"Parent involvement" often means something different to educators than it does to Mexican American parents. Further, differences in family structure, culture, ethnic background, and school experiences can lead to interpretations within the Mexican American community that are quite different from those of other minority parents. Mexican Americans tend to value parental involvement in schools when they see their activities enhancing the school environment for their children (Delgado-Gaitán, 1991). They are likely to become more involved when school staff show concern for their child. School staff, on the other hand, generally understand parent involvement to be efforts aimed at increasing student achievement. In the schools we studied, we observed staff using the following strategies to increase parent involvement:

- building on cultural values of Mexican American parents
- stressing personal contact with parents
- fostering communication with parents
- creating a warm environment for parents
- facilitating structural accommodations for parent involvement

School staff also were aware of their responsibilities to meet the needs of diverse populations. Those needs often extended beyond purely educational concerns, requiring involvement in the community. Best practices in community involvement address health, safety, and economic issues.

School staff who originate from outside the Mexican American community may need additional professional development to interact effectively with the Mexican American community. As Villanueva and Hubbard (1994) observed, honoring culturally relevant values such as respect, informal small talk, and personal contact are important in building school-community relationships. Professional development that extends to the community should include an understanding of how economic, class, racial, and political factors interact in the community and the school. When educators proactively learn about the communities they serve, they are better prepared to provide learning opportunities that extend beyond the school's walls (López, Scribner, & Mahitivanichcha, 2001; Scribner, Young, & Pedroza, 1999).

Collaborative Governance and Leadership

Collaborative governance and leadership in effective schools serving Mexican American students did not seem

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to be driven by state-mandated accountability measures. Educators held themselves accountable, however, believing that all children can learn and that it was their responsibility to make it happen (Scribner & Reyes, 1999). Communication and collaboration were considered top priorities. Participation in site-based management teams and coordinated planning and communication made teachers feel involved and valued. In the area of governance, these successful schools shared several attributes:

- a clear, coherent vision and mission shared by the school community
- collaborative administrators who modeled their dedication and vision
- humanistic leadership philosophies
- empowerment of professional staff
- current and appropriate professional development
- an ethic of caring
- the belief that all students can succeed
- an emphasis on accountability
- a culture of innovation

Student-Centered Classroom Environments

In general, the high-performing schools we observed were open, friendly, and culturally inviting. Students were allowed and encouraged to interact with one another and to engage in collaborative learning activities. We observed a variety of instructional approaches. In fact, there is no identifiable, easily transferable program to recommend. Instead, successful schools and teachers seemed to do "what it takes" to help students succeed. This meant teachers worked together to identify learning experiences that would benefit students.

For students whose English was limited, coordinated English language instruction was requisite to success. In the regular classroom, as Moll and Gonzalez (1994) observed, we saw teachers provide assistance in Spanish whenever it seemed such assistance would aid learning. At times, this was done on a formal daily basis; other times spontaneously, as the need arose.

In summary, factors contributing to student-centered classroom environments for Mexican American students included

- teachers who accepted full responsibility for helping students
- teachers who were extremely caring and nurturing to students
- consistent, productive, and intensive collaboration among teachers
- the encouragement of collaborative learning
- student access to a wide variety of learning materials
- utilization of both Spanish and English, as needed, to enhance learning

Advocacy-Oriented Assessment Practices

Students whose first language is not English often run the risk of being referred for special services. High-performing schools serving Mexican American students were cautious about referring students prematurely. Prereferral systems were in place for students who experienced academic problems, including instructional modifications, team planning and teaching, intensive English as a second language (ESL) instruction, and the use of ESL-certified classroom teachers. Language assessments were done with care. For example, teachers recognized that a student new to this country needed an adjustment period, to avoid misplacement in special education.

Intensive language development, team planning/teaching, and coordination of instruction were strategies consistently employed for the benefit of students. Finally, the high-performing schools we observed shared a philosophy that stressed collaboration and familiarity with ESL student needs, which resulted in an advocacy-oriented approach to assessment (Paredes Scribner, 1995).

Summary

During the last two decades, our research and the research of others have produced extensive information on effective schools (Beck & Murphy, 1996; Edmonds, 1979; Garcia, 1999). In general, we have learned that in effective schools serving Mexican American students, teachers have high expectations for student achievement; teachers also emphasize the development and acquisition of literacy skills throughout the content areas to enhance language and cognitive development. The school climate is one that is conducive to learning, and one in which cultural diversity is celebrated. Regular feedback is provided to parents so monitoring student progress becomes a goal for teachers and parents.

Teaching practices alone do not make effective schools, however. Like earlier effective schools studies, recent research confirms the importance of organizational variables, such as inclusive leadership that creates a sense of community, drawing everyone into the learning process and preventing alienation of any stakeholders, be they faculty, students, parents, or the larger Mexican American community.

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